

Praying for the Dead



Guild of All Souls

233 Grobe Road

South Orange, N. J. 07079

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BY THE REVEREND A. HASELMAYER, JR., PH.D.

“**W**HY DO Episcopalians pray for the dead?” This question is often asked, and to it we must make a clear and definite answer. First we say that praying for the dead has always been a practice of the historic Christian Church, and that it was found under God’s revelation in Judaism before the coming of our Lord. For in the Second Book of the Maccabees we read that Judas Maccabeus sent an offering of money to Jerusalem for prayers for those who had been slain in battle. But our practice of praying for the faithful departed is much more than an historic custom. It is based upon a fact about human life which is revealed to us by God. Christian life does not terminate with death. The grace which is bestowed upon the soul in Holy Baptism makes the Christian “a member of Christ, a child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.” These familiar phrases from the Church Catechism mean that Holy Baptism bestows upon the Christian soul a supernatural life which extends beyond this world of time and space. No matter what judgment awaits the soul when death concludes this early existence, the life of the baptized Christian goes on eternally. It continues either in a condition of eventful bliss or in a condition of condemnation. Heaven or Hell awaits every Christian soul. Oblivion or non-existence awaits none. We pray for the dead because they still need and can still benefit by our prayers. They are in a state of life where prayer can bring them help and comfort. That state of life we call the Church Expectant or Purgatory.

Purgatory is that state of life in the Church of Christ which is between the Church on earth and the Church in heaven. It is the place into which all Christians who have died in the faith and in a state of grace enter upon their deaths. It is not a place of damnation, nor is it heaven. It is a place of preparation for heaven. Those who die in mortal sin are shut out from the possibility of heaven; they are condemned to hell. All who depart this life in a state

of grace are destined for heaven, but do not enter there immediately. The way to heaven is through Purgatory.

The name Purgatory comes from a Latin word which means *to cleanse*, and has been used from earliest times in referring to that state of life in which we are purged or cleansed, and made ready for heaven. No human soul is ready to enter heaven at the moment of death. All of us have been born into this world in original sin, and have in the course of our lives contracted through direct exercise of our wills more or less actual sin. From original sin we are made clean in Holy Baptism, and from actual sin we are cleansed by the Sacrament of Penance or confession. Those sins are removed from us in this life, but there still remains a certain penalty for them which must be endured and expiated by prayer. Also no soul, even the most devout, is at death entirely free from venial sin. From these also it must be purged after death. Every soul at death is stained by venial sin, and is still labouring under the penalties of mortal sin. Purgatory is that state in which the cleansing of these venial sins and the lifting of the burden of penalties of greater sins is accomplished. Only the Blessed Virgin Mary of all God’s creatures was able at death to enter directly into heaven. Purgatory is the lot of every Christian soul.

Purgatory is not a place of damnation. It is not a place of eternal punishment. It is a temporary abode through which all souls must eventually pass. How long any soul remains in Purgatory in terms of time-duration of this world is a matter of idle theological speculation. All endure Purgatory for a time. The pain of Purgatory lies in the fact that souls there are not in heaven. The joys and pleasures of the world have been left behind at death. All that remains for the soul is the sight of God in heaven. From that Beatific Vision the soul in Purgatory is detained. The souls in the Church Expectant are deprived of the sight of God, and it is for this vision that they long with great desire. For this they yearn, and from this they are kept until the time of expiation has been accomplished. This waiting is their suffering.

The duration of Purgatory is overcome by the prayers of those abiding in it. They pray, and by their prayers they are cleansed. But they can be assisted by the prayers of the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant. It is our privilege in the Church Militant to pray for the departed souls, and by our prayers to help them out of their temporary darkness into the light of the Presence of God. How this is done is a mystery, and how many prayers are needed is a foolish speculation. All that we know is that prayers for the departed are efficacious, and that we should make this praying a part of our regular Christian practice. It is a Christian duty to pray for any soul that is in need of our prayers. The faithful departed in Purgatory, the Saints in Heaven, and we here on earth are all one Church. Herein lies a wonderful unity, the living life of prayer of the Catholic Church. For in heaven the saints of God pray on our behalf, and we on earth seek their intercessions. Likewise we on earth pray for those in Purgatory who need our prayers. Just as we pray for our friends here and ask them to pray for us. In prayer, and especially in the Holy Mass, we are joined with the saints in heaven; so also at the same time and in the same way we are joined with the faithful departed in Purgatory, and joined with each other, for we are members of One Body, which is Christ. The mutual needs of all are raised by each to the Throne of God. The Catholic Church is a community, a true fellowship of prayer; it is the Communion of Saints.

And how shall this necessary help for the Faithful Departed be accomplished? Three ways are provided, and are in accord with Christian belief. Prayer, the Offering of the Holy Mass, and Alms.

1. Prayer. By prayer we mean the devotions of the individual, public and private, raised on behalf of the departed. We should keep a list of our departed friends, relatives, and benefactors. We should pray regularly for the happy repose of their souls. In the Book of Common Prayer we find many prayers and collects suitable for this purpose. The prayers that will be found on Pages 268, 319, 332, 334, and 590 are suitable for such praying. The Guild of All Souls

publishes an appropriate Litany for the Dead. Of more ancient tradition and appropriateness are the shorter ejaculatory prayers, "Rest eternal grant unto them, O Lord: and let light perpetual shine upon them;" and "May they rest in peace;" and "May the souls of the faithful through the mercy of God rest in peace." Any of these devotional forms or all of them can be used on behalf of the faithful departed. Christians should learn these by heart, and make frequent use of them, together with the *Our Father, Hail Mary* and *Glory be*.

Praying for the Holy Souls should be a normal and natural part of our devotional lives. In the regular Services of the Church we take part in such devotion: and prayers as the Priest offers them. But we must not be content with this. We must pray ourselves. How many opportunities we have in the ordinary routine of our daily lives for this great work of mercy! How often we write letters of sympathy to relatives of the departed and fail to add a word of prayer for the repose of the soul of the dead one! How often we hear of a death and pass it over with some conventional remark of sympathy, but fail to say even a silent prayer for the departed soul! How often we send flowers for the dead and fail to send a prayer! Flowers are pretty and thoughtful, a sign of sympathetic interest and courteous respect, but they have no spiritual value. How often we pass by or visit a cemetery without praying for those whose mortal remains are there at rest! So there are countless opportunities for praying for the departed in the daily routine of our lives, if we are only aware of them. It is the aim of The Guild of All Souls to band Christians together to pray for the souls of all the faithful departed and especially for the departed members of the Guild. It is a way of organizing our Christian obligation. Membership in it brings us an opportunity to exercise this duty, and assures us that after our deaths we also shall be remembered in the Church Militant.

II. The Holy Mass. Of all prayers, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the most important and efficacious. We should use the Mass as our best prayer for

the Departed Souls. In every Mass the faithful departed are remembered at the end of the Prayer for the whole state of Christ's Church, and in the private devotions of the Celebrant. In addition to this we have a Mass of Requiem on page 268 in the Book of Common Prayer, a special Collect, Epistle and Gospel for the Burial of the Dead. It is our Christian duty as Prayer Book Churchmen to make use of this Mass of Requiem for the departed. The full burial service consists of the Burial Office, the Mass of Requiem, and the Committal. To omit any portion means a shortened and incomplete service. The most important part is the Mass of Requiem. Why are good Episcopalians content to bury their beloved dead with less than the Church offers and directs? A few prayers, a psalm, a lesson, but the supreme Sacrifice, the great office of the Church omitted. We are not fulfilling our duty as Catholics or Episcopalians unless we make use of all that the Church offers for the departed as well as for the living. This means that Christian burial will take place from the Church and in the morning. Too often Churchmen are content with an afternoon or evening funeral "for the convenience of their friends." The burial office is for the departed, not for friends and relatives. We must give all the Church has to offer to our Holy Dead.

Every Christian should be buried from the Church with a Mass of Requiem. From time to time Priests are called upon to bury those who have no connection with the Church. Such persons are not entitled to burial from the Church nor to a Mass of Requiem. For them the Priest does the best he can. He reads the Burial Office in the home or in a funeral parlour. When we ask that our Christian dead be buried that way, we are giving the impression that they are not, for some reason, entitled to Christian burial. Christian Burial is the right of every Christian; make sure that your wishes are clearly expressed in directions you have left for your own burial rites.

After the burial we can still make use of the Mass of Requiem. Anniversaries of deaths can be so marked. Every Priest says at least one Requiem each month for the departed members of his parish, and

at that time he will be glad to remember other names that may be sent to him. On the second day of November, Holy Church commemorates all the faithful departed. On that day you are requested to send to your parish priest the names of the departed you wish remembered at the Altar, and in many parishes these names are remembered again during the month. This too is a further provision on the part of the Church for the care and benefit of the holy dead.

III. Alms. Finally we care for and succour the Holy Dead by our Alms. Let us understand that our alms are not something that we give out of our abundance, nor need they necessarily be limited to money. Any money which we offer to the Church at the time of a burial or an anniversary requiem must represent a sacrifice on our part, made with an intention for the dead. Any money that we may give on All Souls Day effects the same end. The important thing to remember is that we are not trying to buy the repose of the souls of the faithful; the money offering is merely a token of the personal sacrifice we are making for our holy dead. And making the offering means that we are adding that much more to the intention of our prayers. But there are other sacrifices we can make. In times past the faithful living had a great deal to do with the preparation of the bodies of the faithful dead for the burial. Today this is being done by professionals, and becoming less and less Christian in character and result. The work of corporal mercy still endures to visit and comfort the bereaved, to attend burial requiems and anniversary masses; these activities are alms and duties. All of these works of Christian charity can be done with an intention of prayer, are pleasing in the sight of God, and of benefit to the Holy Souls.

Prayers for the dead, Masses for the dead, and Alms for the dead are the good deeds we can do for the faithful departed. Let us give serious consideration to these things, and make praying for the faithful departed a regular habit of our prayer life. Let us not merely cherish the memory of the departed. Let us not mourn awhile and then forget. Let us care for them in the ways appointed by Holy Church.